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AN ATHABASCAN TRADITION FROM ALASKA.¹

AN old man, his wife, and two sons lived in the valley between the Koyukuk and Yukon. The man had become too old to go out any longer, and told his boys that they must travel alone. They answered that they wished to go.

In the morning they found a porcupine track. Following this down stream, they came to a large river running full of ice. At the edge of the water the track disappeared. The brothers leaped on a cake of ice and floated down stream. Landing again and looking for food, they found a fish that had been left on the ice, and saw many sled-tracks. They followed these. Then they heard faint weeping. Going on cautiously, they saw a porcupine carrying a load. Coming close, they asked it why it cried. When it did not answer, they clubbed it dead, cooked it, and ate it.

Going on, they saw a village. An old woman came out, saw them, and called to the people of the village to prepare food for them. The brothers entered a large house, where an old man was seated on a caribou-skin. They sat down on each side of him on caribou-skins and were given food. Seeing only young women, besides the old man and woman, the brothers asked where the young men were. The young women said that there were none, but that they could do many difficult things that even men could hardly do. The older brother boasted that they could not overcome him, but the young women answered that they were only explaining why they did not need men.

In the morning the young women went hunting. The brothers went with them. Then the women outran the older brother and teased him. Becoming angry, he said, —

“You cannot do one thing. Stand at a distance and shoot at me. If I am not hit, I will shoot at you.”

The younger tried to interpose, warning him of the women’s ability; but the older remained angry and insisted. The women finally consented. When they shot, he leaped, but four arrows struck him together and he fell dead. The younger brother mourned for him.

When he wished to return and asked the way, he was told that it was dangerous, and the monsters he would meet were described to him. Nevertheless he started.

After going some time, he saw a cliff with the nest of enormous birds. The old ones were away, but he found a young eagle.

¹ Contributed as part of the Proceedings of the California Branch of the American Folk-Lore Society.

This tradition is communicated through Rev. W. A. Brewer of Burlingame, Cal. The author, one of his pupils, is from a Yukon tribe which he calls Tonidzughultsilhnu.

"What do your parents do when they come?" he asked.

"When they come," the eaglet answered, "it becomes dark, it blows, and there is thunder. When it is my mother, it rains. When it is my father who comes, it hails."

Then the young man killed the young bird. He waited. It became dark, and thundered, and rained, while the air was blown against him by the beating of the great bird's wings. The young man shot it, and springing forward killed it with his moose-horn club. When the other bird came, he killed it too.

He went on until he came to a porcupine as high as a hill, which was in a cave through which the young man must travel. He could find no way around. Hiding outside the cave, he made a noise. The porcupine started to back out, lashing its tail against the mountain-side until the tail was bare of its enormous quills. Then as it emerged the young man shot it and clubbed it to death.

Going on, he saw tracks of an enormous lynx. This the women had told him was the strongest of the monsters. Here, too, he tried to go around, but could not. Then he tried to shoot it, but the lynx caught his arrows with its claws. Seeing his attempts were in vain, he waited for death. Then the lynx ordered him to clear away the snow so it could sit at ease while devouring him, and to heap up wood by which it could cook him. The young man did this, but the lynx told him to gather more firewood. The young man gathered, going farther each time. Then he heard some one say, —

"Brother, quickly stand on my back and I will carry you away."

"Where are you?" he asked.

"Here."

Looking down, he saw an ermine at his feet. "I will kill you if I step on your back," he said.

"No, jump on me. I will carry you."

Then he jumped strongly, but the ermine did not even move.

"Your back is too small. I cannot sit on it."

"Lay a stick across my back, and put another across my neck for your feet."

He laid the sticks across the ermine and sat down. Immediately it carried him to his house.

The young man's parents rejoiced to see him. In gratitude they gave the ermine a shell necklace. That is why the ermine has white around its neck.

Arthur Wright.